

THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING



On The Festival of Laughter and Forgetting

Laughter and forgetting – this phrase perhaps best encompasses what it is to be human. It does so not only because of the ‘quotidian-ness’ embedded in these words but also because both to laugh and to forget means to surrender. To surrender for a brief moment to emotions or the absence of them, to surrender individuality, to surrender to ideas, surrender to transcendence of body, of mind. These ideas are retrospective – I have never confronted the ‘idea’ laughter or forgetting with such intellectual rigor till I experienced a whole range of the two at the Rangashankara *Festival of Laughter and Forgetting*.

This was the sixteenth edition of the festival and was curated by city – based theatre group Sandbox Collective. The festival played host to seven plays and several ancillary events thought the second week of November. The theme itself was borrowed from Milan Kundera’s novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and interestingly, the festival as a whole resembled a structure similar to the book. Each day explored a different ideation of the theme, bringing about an effect akin to compartmentalisation or the effect of segments that the book has; yet a visible core idea ran through all the performances in the fest. What is rather poignant about this theme is that it brings together to concepts that *can* be diametrically opposed in the manner in which they are *experienced* -- laughter is a physical reaction and forgetting, a cerebral one. By bringing the two together, there is a sense of bringing together action and thought. This is what the fest beautifully brought together for the audience i.e. there was ‘reconciliation’ between the paradox that is action and thought. If one looked closely, each performance resembled at least another in terms of content and form and it is by examining the juxtapositions between the various plays that I could make sense of the festival as a whole.

The curtain riser for the festival Nava, by Dramanon Bangalore and Aravani Arts Project and the penultimate performance, The Hunger Artist, a solo performance by Aum Yash Kendra bore a number of similarities. Both performances had a square like structure at the centre of the stage – while the latter was three dimensional and placed vertically, the former was lateral and was constituted of nine smaller squares. For both the majority of the performance was contained within the square and the square clearly represented a reality that no one in the audience would have been familiar with. While the former converted it to a space to explore the nine *rasas* through narratives of the transgender community, the latter used the box as a representative of the cage in Kafka’s *The Hunger Artist* and the scenarios switched from the agrarian crisis in Vidarbha, Maharashtra, the mid-day meal scam and Gandhi’s use of hunger strikes to propagate *ahimsa*.

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As both plays brought to the stage realities that the audience had no context to, in both action and delivery of content, the audience was directly confronted. Before the performance of *Nava*, a number of things were collected from the audience – a pair of sunglasses, an umbrella, a flask, two *dupattas*. In the middle of the show, these objects took to the front of the stage. Each performer walked up to an object, asked the owner of the object to acknowledge that it was hers and upon this acknowledgement, the performer retorted with a line in jest, presumably. The audience for *The Hunger Artist*, walked in on many cameras and phones recording them and these visuals were displayed on a screen that occupied the centre of the stage. These visuals were then replayed during intense scenes in the performance. Both these methods situated the audience in the performance, thereby evoking a sense of them being physically present in the world of the play. When I, as audience was confronted with my belonging in a setting that I could not relate to or my picture in a space that I did not know because of my privilege, it is only by locating an element that I as familiar with that I could connect with the performances. I say connect and not empathise as these are not situations that I could put myself in. However, through this evident physical connection that I could make between myself and the performance, I could think about questions relating to creating and privilege --- that what I looked at as art was in fact someone's reality.

The first and the final play of the fest too engaged in dialogue with each other. Aagaaz Theatre Trust's *Rihla* and Bhasha Centre's *Eidgah ki Jinnat* looked at ideas of nationhood and citizenship. *Rihla* was an adaptation of Andreas Flourkai's *I Want A Country* while the latter followed the story of a young boy and his sister in Kashmir. What was rather poignant about these two performances is how the idea of 'nation' manifested. With the former, a nation or rather the idea of a nation existed and demanded protection while the latter explored ideas of what a nation should be like i.e. in *Eidgah* there was a semblance of a 'physical nation' while the other existed in the mind with each dialogue beginning with the reiteration – *'I want a nation.'* In some sense, every idea explored by the young actors of Aagaaz of what an ideal nation should look like was contradicted in the representation of 'nation' in *Eidgah Ki Jinnat*. This was not just in term of the 'idea' but also in the use of props to create a nation.

Rihla made extensive use of two ladders tied together and this prop assumed different forms through the course of the performance – a ship, a dead body, a tent like structure that housed every member of the cast and all their thoughts on an ideal nation; thus, it was more fluid. For instance, one character kept emphasizing the fact that she wanted a nation where there would be no old people. Although, every point about what a nation should be like was not the same, there was no vehement opposition to anyone's ideal nation. What this did to me was re – emphasise that nation is more a psychological entity than a physical one. With the latter, this belief was shattered. One of the most striking scenes was a dialogue between two soldiers on a wooden platform where one remarked that the platform was their nation and

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their gun, the flag – a rigid idea of a nation. What the former lacked in terms of a 'physical nation,' the latter lacked in terms of 'ideology.' Thus, by putting them in dialogue, I can only hope to mediate the gap between the two.

The last two plays did not engage in themes as abstract or as intense as the above plays. *Hello Farmaish* by Dur Se Brothers told the tale of a group of women in Haryana who 'accidentally' start a radio channel about space following Kalpana Chawla's space mission. It made for a rather comic play as it was set in a village where ideas about gender roles abided by traditional patriarchal principles. *Sangeeth Baari* by Kaali Billi Productions took the form of a *lavani*, a Marathi folk form that called for a lot of interaction with the audience and a lot of improvise. The obvious theme that the two shared in common was challenging traditional women roles in society – one in science and the other in the performing arts. In *Hello Farmaish*, the comedic tone was broken when the women at the radio station received calls from men who posed questions that had nothing to do with science. A particular scene that stood out was when Geeta, the 'head' of the channel was instructed to not speak on the radio again as her involvement as causing her mother in law to feel uncomfortable. In *Sangeeth Baari*, the audience's cheers were silenced when the narrators spoke of the problems that these women and their families faced when they were not on stage performing.

Both these performances, for the most part were light in tone and this was broken only in instances such as those mentioned above. However, these situations were not far removed from a reality that the audience were familiar with and thus, in terms of content really struck a chord with the audience. In terms of pure aesthetics, both performances were witness to a lot of song and dance, both choreographed and improvised. In India, where the film industry is fraught with song and dance that glorify and encourage the male gaze, these performances subverted those stereotypes with their content; yet again bridging the gap between the action and thought behind their performance.

I write this review as an audience who did not understand the languages in which these plays were performed. However, what struck me about the festival as a whole was how different manifestations of laughter and forgetting were brought together on stage and how these ideas were effortlessly translated through action. It makes me wonder if we actually lose something when language plays mediator between thought and action.