

THEATRE FESTIVAL'19

THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING



Ranga Shankara Festival of Laughter and Forgetting - 2019

Art does have a purpose and that purpose is to change things – Lorraine Hansberry (To be Young, Gifted and Black)

Ranga Shankara Theatre, Bangalore, goes by the motto- 'Theatre Alive'. It is a testament to this simple yet profound statement that Hansberry makes in her book 'To be Young, Gifted and Black.' Art can fulfill its purpose only when it is alive, only when it defines life and the essence of life. This is exactly what the Ranga Shankara Festival of Laughter and Forgetting 2019 attempted to achieve through its six plays- Nava, Rihla, Hello Farmaish, Hunger Artist, Sangeet Baari and Eidgah Ki Jinnat. The theme of this year's festival was inspired from the concepts of French author Milan Kundera's renowned work 'The Book of Laughter and Forgetting.' The festival curator and founder of Sanbox Collective Theatre, Nirmala Ravindran, reflected that the festival was curated not with a purpose of making a change or initiating a revolution, but to invite contemplation on some of the most pressing issues that the society is facing today. Theatre as an intellectual form of art, owes this to the society and it is with that in mind that each play was included in the festival. Every play introduced the audience to different perspectives and dimensions of what defined laughter and forgetting to the different facets of society.

Nava, the curtain raiser, reflected the voice of the marginalized. The unsung, unheard predicaments of the LGBTQ community in India were brought to the fore in the play. The cast and crew of the Kannada play, mostly the members of Aravani Art Project, an artistic organization of transwomen based in Bangalore, engaged the audience in a process of self-reflection through dark humour and satire. The most commendable aspect of the play was its representation of different narratives within the community, signifying that each member of the community was an individual with an her own identity and morale. The play presented its narrative through the different connotations associated with the Navarasas and the thought provoking climax showed the blurring of the boundaries between the nine rasas, implying the blurring of boundaries between the rules and conventions that the society has imposed on the marginalized. The symbolic role reversal with the actors hooting and laughing at the audience or the society for their ignorance and indifference was a commendable attempt at defying the conventions of the stage. The

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gaze was upon the audience for the duration of the scene and for this duration, the conventions were forgotten, the sense of identity was forgotten.

Rihla, an adaptation of the Greek play 'I Want A Country' by Andreas Flourakis, took to the stage on the second day of the festival. The play was performed by the Delhi based theatre troupe, Aagaz Theatre Trust. Neel Chaudhuri, the director, in an interactive session with audience after the play, said that the Arabic word 'Rihla' meant 'a journey through the real and the imaginary worlds'. Chaudhuri was inspired by the travel conquests of Ibn Battuta and this encouraged him to explore the concept of transcendence from the real to the imaginary world. The collective voice of a group of young people disillusioned by their way of living overlapped with that of the individual narratives. The voice of each individual in the group was distinct yet bound together by a common goal. The use of space to signify the interpersonal relationship of the characters was a brilliantly executed in the play. The trope of forgetting the past and starting afresh also functions as an extended metaphor throughout the play. However, they were open to interpretation and reflection leaving the audience themselves in a state of disillusionment.

'Hello Farmaish' by Yuki Elias narrated the story of a group of women in Haryana village, who fantasizes about the outer space and the mysteries it holds. When the idea of the unknown, unexplored outer space was blended with a generous serving of humour, the play became a good example of striking the balance between two vastly different discourses. The light and sound design worked in complete harmony to elevate the dramatic effect the play had on the audience. All these do not, however, overshadow the bold political and philosophical statements that the play brings forth. It efficiently explored issues like gender discrimination and concepts like transcendence through narratives of romance and comedy. Yuki Elias says, the play was conceived when she was travelling and beheld a starry sky that evoked a sense of losing herself in infinity, in the darkness. The play was, therefore, an expression of forgetting oneself and transcending to a space unknown, unexplored and mysterious.

Kalli Billi productions staged their renowned performance of 'Sangeet Bari' at the festival, introducing the audience to Lavni, the rich traditional folk art form of Maharashtra. Excerpts from the different forms of Lavni were performed, along with a commentary on the unknown, forgotten narratives of this art form interspersed between the performances. The dance performances exuded raw and sensuous energy, with the

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audience playing an integral role in the development of the artistic and dramatic impact. The performances were in dialogue with the narratives of the performers who dealt with opposition and criticism for practicing the art form. The purpose of the play was to entertain and provoke contemplation about the status quo, simultaneously, and it was successful in doing so. The play was directed by Savithri Medhatul and written by Bhushan Korgaonkar.

'The Hunger Artist' directed by Gurleen Judge, is a play inspired by Franz Kafka's short story titled the same. The play places the predicaments discussed in the short story in the Indian context and invites contemplation to one of the most imposing yet significant issues of today, hunger. It explores the nuances of a life that is overpowered by hunger and what changes it can make to your identity as an individual.

Abhishek Majumdar's play, 'Eidgah Ki Jannat, also draws several parallels with Hunger Artist, making the political and social consciousness of the audience, their instruments to create awareness about the ways of the world. The play built on meaningful imageries and profound dialogues invites contemplation to the political, religious feuds in Kashmir. The well acclaimed play weaves in narratives of religious and political radicalization and its impact on the generations of today.

The Artistic Director of Ranga Shankara Theatre states that the significance of the space is that once the lights dim, people cry, laugh and engage in the plays, without even knowing who the person sitting next to you is. You forget yourself, you became the part of the collective. The festival, indeed, made these words meaningful. That is, after all, the magic of theatre. It is the collective that makes it complete and the collective that gives it life.