

THEATRE FESTIVAL'19

THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING



The Play That Goes Wrong

Based on Mischief Theatre Company's original of the same name

Language: English

Playwrights: Henry Lewis, Jonathon Sayer and Henry Shields

Director: Shweta Pal

Company: Kalamanch (Manipal Institute of Communication)

"It's a stage manager's worst nightmare and an audience's cue for laughter," commented Charles McNulty in his review of the 'The Play that Goes Wrong' in Los Angeles Times. When both these aspects of a play- the glitches and the humour - comes in tangent with each other, an exceptional piece of slapstick comedy born from a diabolic murder mystery is the result. It is like the preparation of a magical potion, even a minute mistake would be detrimental. Striking this balance was the biggest challenge before the student-run theatre company in Manipal that staged the play as their annual production early this month. The play received much critical acclaim from the audience for their dexterity in rendering justice to the essence of the play. The production exemplified a highly commendable attempt at striking the balance and in the process displayed the prowess of its cast and crew as students of theatre.

'The Play That Goes Wrong' originally performed by Mischief Theatre Company, follows the format of a play within a play. The cast and crew of a fictitious theatre society, prepares to stage the play 'The Murder at Havisham Manner' and nothing goes as planned. The actors fumble with the dialogues, there are extensive and unsettling silences, props fall apart, light and sound becomes erratic and eventually everything is engulfed in chaos. The genius of the play lies in the capability of the director and the actors to make the mistakes look spontaneous and effortless. The production received a full house audience, actively and enthusiastically engaging with the events unfurling on stage.

The most striking aspect of the play was the incorporation of certain elements that the audience easily identified with. There were several digressions in the plot that were crafted to fit in the interests of a wide spectrum of audience. Since the play is originally American, most of the jargon used would be unfamiliar to the Indian audience and the

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evoking humour from such situations would be challenging. The thoughtful adaptation of specific instances into the Indian context (for instance, certain dialogues were delivered in Hindi and Hindi songs were used as background music) catered to the interests of the audience without draining the essence of the play. The humour, that is the soul of the play, was customized for the audience as well as the actors and it shows the attention that the director has paid to the detailing of the scenes.

Elevating the tension of the murder mystery and being funny at the same time proved a difficult challenge to the actors as the play progressed. The play managed to keep them in tangent to a large extent but the repetition of some scenes and dialogues made it monotonous. There was conscious effort by the actors to break the monotony but it did not help very much. At several instances, the humour was overdone and precarious. These loopholes had a severe impact on the engagement of the audience with the play towards the climax. Moreover, the dynamics between the characters, which was excellent in the beginning, suffered as the play developed. Some of the actors managed to keep the audience engaged but the others were not very successful in doing so.

In short, the play invited contemplation to the crossroads between humour as a medium of entertainment and humour as a medium to convey meaning. While being silly and ridiculous, the play challenged several conventional concepts of theatre, opening doors to untrodden territories. Commenting on the impact that the play left on them, a member of the audience said that it would have had a greater impact if the play was publicized as 'Murder at Havisham Manor' and not 'The Play That Has Gone Wrong.' She said that because the title said so, all that happened on stage were expected and there was no element of surprise. However, this reflection leaves a question. Does it always have to be the unexpected that can engage an audience with a play or is it possible for the predictable also do so? The success of this play does prove the latter right!