

# THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING



## Ranga Shankara's Festival of Laughter and Forgetting 2019

*To laugh is to live profoundly*

This year's annual theatre festival at Ranga Shankara, *The Festival of Laughter and Forgetting* was apt in setting the tone for the month ahead. November was an eventful month in the country in many ways including awaiting the Ayodhya verdict, or the fact that it had been three months since the state of Jammu & Kashmir had been union territorialized without being given a voice and no sign of it getting better, for example. In Bengaluru City, the weather was changing, the days were getting shorter and cooler, there were a string of religious and cultural festivals that had just passed and there were more to look forward to. Still, amidst this festivity and good cheer, there was apprehension, fear, and a feeling that would -- among some -- dissolve in an uneasiness and warning of the years to come. A warning which was acknowledged time and again in the course of the six days at the festival in the plays that were performed and the ancillary performances.

Part of the theatre festival also included a curated exhibition of photographs, poetry, posters, art and a mural that were all in some way intended to be in keeping with the idea of laughter and forgetting. One of the more literal, possibly easier-to-understand, pieces of work was Vinay Hasija's "*Forgetting the Past*". This artwork had a human-like figure moving forward through what could be seen as both space and time, while simultaneously being pulled back by what could be interpreted as a personal past or a collective past (depending on what the figure represented to the audience).

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Hasija's *Forgetting the Past* raised interesting questions in making sense of the idea of collective pasts that we do not want to remember in the context of Abhishek Majumdar's *Eidgah Ke Jinnat*. Set in Kashmir, the play is the story of two orphaned children -- Ashrafi and Bilal -- and the idea of what it means to be free, how this freedom is won or fought for, and how past lives of our own and our loved ones continue to haunt us. The idea of the past in this play was explored through the concept of the *Djinns*. Majumdar's use of supernatural characters that are neither inherently "good" nor "bad" but rather something in-between became a representation of the living characters' baggage, trauma and hope in the lives they were living. Parallel resonances could be seen between Majumdar's play and Vinay Hasija's work -- the idea of desperately trying to forget one's fears, a haunting personal past that becomes a collective past because of the universality of such stories in present-day Kashmir. It also becomes important to look at this play as a story of empathy and try and remember the quality and the power of this emotion.

When one stays with this idea of empathy and what it means to include stories of people who are often left at the margins, to not *forget* them, two plays, in particular, come to mind -- *Nava* by Dramanon and Aravani Art Project, directed by Sharanya Ramprakash and *The Hunger Artist* directed by Gurleen Judge.

Sharanya Ramprakash's *Nava* was a play in Kannada, a language which I am not at all familiar with. As a result, I did not understand most of the dialogues. *Nava* actors were transwomen who told their stories by using the structure of boxed "*navarasas*."

Progressing through the performance they break out of these boxes into more fluid lives and narratives that intersect with one another. The use of the *navarasas* concept with its very firm grounding in classical art traditions to speak about the marginalised was for me an interesting idea. However as an audience who did not understand the language, some of the finer details like what exactly was being laughed about, which dialogues were moving and which ones did not work of each of the nine stories were lost on me. And while plays that are heavily physical have a way of working around the language barrier, *Nava* whose focus is on telling the stories of nine transwomen through incidents was strongly dialogue-based.

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The other play that looked at realities of marginal lives that are very often forgotten was *The Hunger Artist* by Gurleen Judge. Unlike *Nava*, this solo piece was extremely physical and relied equally on the power of dialogues as well as the physicality of the body. It drew inspiration from Kafka's short story of the same name and Namdeo Dhasal's poem "Bhook." The play looked at hunger in the context of poverty, which was a result of the current agrarian crisis in the country. While exploring this it also performed the idea of hunger to an audience that does not live this reality. The audience was made to feel like an outsider from the time it set foot into the theatre because of the camera that pointed and zoomed as and when it pleased and eventually threw back the images at an audience that was left quite shaken after the performance. It made me question my relationship with food, eating as a luxury, and the implications of not being able to access this basic human necessity in an unequal society. As audience, I constantly felt aware of my role of watching and consuming something so disconnected from my reality and how it was not enough to merely consume these stories and be "sympathetic" to "their struggle".

Consuming art without questioning the implications and politics of that form is something that can very easily lead to appropriation of the form. *Sangeet Bari* by Kali Billi Productions as a result of the form they were working with -- Lavani -- was treading this very thin line. An extremely lively, tastefully flirtatious, and playful piece, it was an attempt at reclaiming a dying, marginalised art form and destigmatising the female performer. "The focus is on the lives of these women and an attempt to portray them as artists and human beings unlike the popular image of seductress or victim." was what the last line of the synopsis read. This performance did indeed break the fourth wall and transformed the theatre into something very special with grace, wit, and the stunning voices of dancers and musicians alike. What it did not address, even ironically, and something I would think was important with such a gendered form, was the presence of the male gaze and the internalising of the idea of women's bodies as sexual entities or objects.

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What *Sangeet Bari* did not do, Yuki Ellias did very heartwarmingly in her play *Hello Farmaaish* about the imagination and dreams of five women who “embark on a whimsical adventure from a small Haryanvi settlement into Outer Space.” The surreal and absurd frequented this play, and yet the authenticity of the struggles of being a woman with dreams, and intelligence, and imagination in small-town Haryana was portrayed with empathy and was neither romanticised nor made to look like suffering. This story was a reminder to laugh and to hope and to never let one’s circumstances dictate one’s future. It is the story we all need to hold on to in today’s uncertain times; it was the festival’s moment of absolute suspension of the outside world, an absence of gravity to bring us down, and an absence of friction to make us remember what we had left behind.

What do we leave behind when we want to forget? What do we want to forget that makes us leave people and the places that come with them? What do you do when what you once called home has been taken away from you? How do you conceptualise a new one? Does forgetting the old really help? *Rihla* by Aagaaz Theatre Trust, based on Andreas Flourkis’ *I Want a Country* worked with these questions and how a bunch of young adults who fit broadly into the various archetypes may work these answers out for themselves. It relied a great deal on the potential of irony while speaking about heavy themes -- the loss of a home, the need to rebuild a new one, and what one chooses to take -- what is left of home when all you have is a suitcase, a boat and the ocean, when you have to rely on your imagination because of limited experience? While these ideas were explored with some abstraction, in the sense that it did not situate itself in any particular geopolitical context, it forced one to draw parallels with identities, homes, and lands that are being played with and thrown around in our country as well in different parts of our world.

*The Festival of Laughter and Forgetting* made us laugh and forget but also forced us to remember to never forget. It left us uneasy about the injustices of this world, it left us feeling responsible for the plight of the times we live in, but most importantly it left us with the hope that laughter brings with it. It was a reminder of what Milan Kundera famously wrote “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting. To laugh is to live profoundly.”