

# THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING



## Shakespeare on Wheels - an Experiment in Adventurous Theatre

**Language:** English

**Playwright:** William Shakespeare

**Company:** The HandleBards, UK

The 16th of February 2020 was a day of firsts. It was the first time I went to Bangalore's Whitefield theatre, Jagriti, since I came to study in the city in July 2019, and the first time I watched an English adaptation of the Bard's work -- The Tempest performed by the HandleBards. Previously, in the short span of my play-watching experience, I have watched and enjoyed *What is Done is Done*, an adaptation of Macbeth written and directed by Rajat Kapoor, The Company Theatre's adaptation of Twelfth Night -- *Piya Behrupiya*, and *Hamlet Avataar*, a collaborative piece by The Seoul Factory for the Performing Arts and InKo Centre India. None of these were in English (although *Hamlet Avataar* had some dialogues in English) and all three of them made full use of the liberty that performance allows -- extravagance -- elaborate sets, costumes and an extensive cast. They were all theatrical experiences that seemed to reaffirm the idea of making use of the paraphernalia of theatre in order to successfully entertain its audience.

This adaptation of The Tempest that was performed on a warm afternoon at Jagriti on February 16, 2020 was different. It relied on the show of performance but made use of much simpler and smaller things. Directed by Nel Crouch and performed by the four-woman cast of The HandleBards, a UK-based theatre group on bicycles, this theatrical experience gave the audience a great deal more to think about than just the conflicts of injustice, revenge, and forgiveness that The Tempest is about. The UK-based group does things in a more environmentally and economically-conscious manner than most. When the group tours in the UK, they cycle carrying along with them all their props and costumes and perform mostly in outdoor spaces. In their own words, "we travel by bike because we care about the planet and we want to promote sustainability (and) healthy living". What this then means for the performers is that all their props and costumes and sets have to fit on their bicycles. As a result, none of these can be too heavy or delicate.

The play was performed by a small cast and this meant that almost everyone had to

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play multiple characters. With the exception of Ellice Stevens, who played only Prospero, the other three played at least three if not four different characters. Katie Sherrard, played the roles of Miranda, Alonso, Stephano, and Sebastian; Roisin Brehony was Ferdinand, Caliban, and Antonio; and playing Ariel, Gonzalo, and Trinculo was Tika Mu'tamir. While we often make these "compromises" in school plays when we don't have enough theatre club members to act and end up with a 20 something-year-old playing both an old woman and her niece, with no real distinction of who is who, not for a moment in this 75-minute performance did we confuse Ferdinand, the King's son for the "monster-slave" Caliban who were both played by Roisin Brehony. Nor did we see a slip in the character changes in the performances of Kattie Sherrard and Tika Mu'tamir for that matter. The possibilities for unconvincing character performances lurked at the wings during every character change, and yet, not in a single instance was the audience let down. The transformations were so seamless that we very often did not even realise that they had taken place and each character that was actually played by the same person seemed to be played by different people.

These transformations were also that much more challenging because there was no concept of a backstage or even the wings for that matter. The only set they had was a three-sided frame with alternating red and white streamers which seemed to form a screen or curtain behind which all the props were kept and where the character and costume changes took place. The costumes were the only indication, other than the actors' performances themselves, of the changing characters and as a result, became an important feature of the play. They were starkly different from one another and yet they were nothing elaborate -- all four of them wore standard cotton khaki-coloured shorts and a white shirt over which all other elements of the different costumes were worn, taken off and switched around.

The concise cast also resulted in actors relying on members from the audience to step in as different characters through the course of this play. At a couple of points in the play, a few people from the audience seated in the first few rows were called on stage to play different characters. This was another "daring" feature in the play, which caught the audience off guard when a son, his father and another 30-something man were called on stage to play different roles. But we settled into it and at the end of a three-minute performance (of mostly standing around on stage as they were instructed by the cast) the three audience-actors got their share of well-deserved applause.

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It was not only these isolated instances in the play that engaged the audience directly. The entire energy of this play, like most performance-heavy forms I would assume, was dependent as much on the audience as it was on the actors themselves - - the two thrived off of each other. This meant that from the very beginning the actors had to judge the level of responsiveness and enthusiasm of its audience. They did this in an amusing, unassuming, and rather endearing manner.

As the audience trickled into the auditorium between 2:45 pm and 3:00 pm -- the three bells ringing at timely intervals to warn you of how long you have before you are locked out of the hall for not being punctual -- the entire cast was out on stage. There was music playing in the background and each one of them was being their goofy selves, showing off their moves (Mu'tamir does a mean imitation of Michael Jackson's Moon Walk) and throwing a beach ball around, between themselves initially, and then to the audience as well. The Jagriti auditorium was a comparatively small one that allowed for this intimacy and comfort between the audience and the performers to form with little apprehension, and it was this game of *"don't let the beachball touch the ground before we reach twenty taps"* that set the tone for an interactive performance where the audience would not be paralysed by self-consciousness.

The play itself was Shakespearean in every possible way, its wit intact, it was a laugh riot with amazing comic timing. The comedy was extravagant and jaw-dropping, going to the extent of Prospero even taking off his clothes (she was wearing clothes underneath that, of course) as part of a scene where he was attempting a card trick, and this was not in any sense out of place. Because it was Shakespeare, the humour was not necessarily "refined" -- actors were taking off clothes and in most Indian contexts this, more so because it was a woman, would be seen as obscene -- but this "crass" humour was enjoyed by everyone across the age spectrum that seemed to have been as wide as 7 to 65 years.

In a sense, it was universal also because it was Shakespeare. The ageing and the middle-aged, the 30-somethings, the angst-ridden 20-something and the young almost-adults in the audience that afternoon had all encountered him at some point, and on more than one occasion -- unwelcome as it might have been in the school syllabus, it was still a thing of nostalgia. The younger ones who were dragged by their parents and grandparents were sure to encounter it soon enough (our post-

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colonial hangover and the literary canon would make sure of it) and what better an introduction to his work than this laugh riot. It could have been a lot of things, conventional, "classic" etc. but the HandleBard women brought back to Shakespearean performance a charm and play that was possible not only because of the novelty or adventure but because of the integrity of their practice.