

THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING



'Ek Anek': One, Many and Unity - a Lesson in Solidarity

Based on Doordarshan's 'Ek Anek Aur Ekta'

Language: Hindi

Performed by: The Lower Tibetan Children's Village and the Gamru Village School as a part of Drift Theatre's workshops

Ek Anek was the opening performance of this year's Dharamshala Residential and International Festival for Theatre (d.r.i.f.t). An annual festival in the Dhauladhar Mountains in the Himalayas, d.r.i.f.t is an initiative of the Pocket Company to develop local interest (and participation) in theatre in semi-urban setting as well as creating a common platform for the various communities in Dharamshala. To encourage this, d.r.i.f.t conducts regular school workshops in two schools over the year -- the Gamru Village School and Lower Tibetan Children's Village. *Ek Anek* was a result of these workshops and a first time collaboration between an Indian school and Lower TCV in 50 years.

The play itself was inspired by the Doordarshan animated segment *Ek Anek Aur Ekta* (one, many and unity). Beginning with two children trying to pluck mangoes it introduces children to the diversity in our country and the importance of togetherness by going back to the basics. The different flowers -- rose, jasmine, marigold -- all coming together to form a garland, that is unity in diversity. And this unity is the most powerful defence of the birds that are ensnared in the hunters' net: the only way they escape is when they fly together bearing the weight of the net equally and being helped by their friends, the rats.

The bird and animal masks were intricate, effective and made from upcycled cardboard. Puppet and mask maker, Toztli Abril De Dios from Mexico worked with the children of the two schools to make the props. They had to be simple enough for twenty four pre teens to handle on their own on a stage with no wings, while also living up to the excitement of children performing on stage in costume. The monkey and elephant masks and the bird beaks and of course the large mango tree with its acid looking, fluorescent mangoes were created exactly to serve such purposes.

Watching the children one could see the amount of work that had gone in from both sides -- the children and the d.r.i.f.t team -- in the process of putting together the story

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of “one, many and unity” (a pressing one for our times) with such sincerity. A majority of the

children were on stage at a festival for the first time, but the seriousness in them about their work, (resulting from the process of questioning and discussing diversity and unity during rehearsals) along with the inherently playful spirit of their age, and the story they were telling made sure that the audience went back from this with fond memories and having rediscovered an important idea.

The togetherness that this play spoke about also transgressed national boundaries -- literally. Tibetan and Indian pre teens, working with Toztli Abril De Dios, this year's artist in residence from Mexico, coming together in a workshop facilitated by d.r.i.f.t in a place as cosmopolitan as Dharamshala is not something that happens at every theatre festival. Place this in the larger context of a country that had suddenly erupted and come together to stand in solidarity against the Citizenship Amendment Act and one begins to see just how political our lives are. The politics of this short play might be easy to brush off by saying “they are just children what do they know?” but it was the ease with which these children simplified the idea of solidarity in diversity that was most powerful.

If all else fails, we can surely rely on the theatre of coming generations to continue to remind us, even through plays as short as ten (or twenty) minutes, of the pressing need to embrace our diversity and come together in solidarity, for that is the only way of getting our mangoes down from the tall tree. *Ek Anek* is a hopeful reminder that the young will stand in solidarity, upholding the spirit of the country even when the hunters' divisive acts refuse to cease.