

THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING



5 Types of Laughter (and a Discourse on Forgetting)

Ranga Shankara entered its 16th year with a festival that spanned six vibrant days brimming with relevant discourses and performances that shattered the boundaries around theatre. Curated by Sandbox Collective, the festival of laughter and forgetting gave its audience and participants the chance to celebrate, along with the space to ruminate. Inspired by Milan Kundera's delectably profound novel "The Book of Laughter and Forgetting", this festival aimed at providing an artistic response to the current political climate - one where mob lynchings are conveniently ignored and peaceful student protests are greeted with lathi charge. Where the supposed fourth pillar of democracy lies, shatters, and the truth, whatever that is, has become yet another victim of incessant beatings gone unnoticed. The plays selected at the festival are careful picks that try to make the privileged audience reflect and introspect while questioning and dissenting the *organized forgetting* that our country is undergoing. Like all things celebratory, though, this festival too had its gaping holes, spotted by the audience and critics alike in some selected plays that failed to impress.

The Laughter of Irony

9 neat boxes drawn with white tape adorn the stage. Meticulous, organized, straight, systematic.

There is a flurry, a shoot in the music, and 9 transgender women adorned all in black enter into this world - they dance, without choreography, without organization, all over the 9 neat boxes, destroying their straightness. Challenging their rigidity. Questioning their system. Shattering their boundaries. And through this dance, they show us the navarasas of their lives in 75 minutes.

When the audience was lined up for the play, some stealing peeks at the bioscope shyly, some still humming the folk tunes that had serenaded the foyer 10 minutes ago, and some looking with pride at the diverse audience which included many transgender women, they were all handed a rose each. They placed the rose on their hair and themselves on the seats, and were ready to dive into the first play of the festival.

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Our actors arrive with style, splendour and a kind of carefree abandon that can only be felt by people who aren't chained within the polarity of two genders. They arrive, and they laugh (**hasya rasa**). *They laugh for a good 10 minutes – they laugh at all the ironies that encircle those who are confined within the limited space that a box of gender roles allows. They compel the audience to question the absurdities that surround them in the name of gender, and to question the ease with which most of us have given in to them.* Why must two kids find a gender non-conforming person threatening (**bhayanaka rasa**) to the point of fleeing? Why must a woman travelling in a bus show disgust (**bhibhatsya rasa**) at the touch of a transgender? And why, oh why, must a cop violently beat up the transgender women they find on streets? What *rasa* is it that these people feel towards transgenders and gender non-conforming individuals? Is it fear of the unknown, disgust of the unrelatable, or anger on those who dare to be different, who dare to live a little more freely?

This is how Sharanya Ramaprakash and Aravani Foundation's "Nava" shakes the audience - not by trying to prove a point, but simply by handing the mic to those who have thus far been marginalised. Not by trying to explain their perspective through the shallow understandings of a privileged, heterosexual, gender binary and upper caste perspective, but by shutting up and passing the mic to those who are actually being discussed.

So when the audience goes back home after watching this performance, they are taking with them a million introspective questions about themselves and the boxes they are in, a hundred ideas about bringing more fluidity to each narrative, a dozen ways of checking their privilege, and one small rose each, reminding them to be more kind and more inclusive.

The Laughter of Wonderment

Like a Dali painting, Dur Se Brothers' "Hello Farmaaish" written by Sneh Sapru and directed by Yuki Ellias is a deeply immersive play that uses surrealistic picturization and a cinematic soundtrack to blend together an experience of wonderment for the audience. The inspiring story of a group of Haryanvi women discovering the marvels of outer space is told with such delicacy that the audience can't help but heave a great sigh of compassion for these brave women. The women in this small village in Haryana find their voices and their "Kalpana, imagination" after one of them listens to the stimulating story of Kalpana Chawla – also a woman of Haryanvi origin, who has

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reached the stars – quite literally. And here begins their starry affair, an imaginative space odyssey that transfers its characters' amazement to the audience without losing out on intensity. As these women find themselves awing at the possibilities the outer space has in store for them, the audience laughs in awe of these women whose imagination transports us to a different sphere.

With more than just a hint of magic realism, Hello Farmaaish boasts of an eclectic cast that masterfully delivers each scene with good comic timing and deep characterization.

However, the fact that Haryana has the lowest sex ratio in India loomed large over the audience as the play took sharper turns to reveal the darker and murkier side of this endeavour. Soon the women who are so creatively making use of their community radio start receiving death threats, and the avid reader inside them is made to burn their books away. The Chronicles of princess Zeeshaan are left incomplete as their books are snatched out of the women's hands, but they find more creative ways to fulfil their heart's desire. A beautifully choreographed piece in the middle of the play is played out to resonating poetry where the women are seen to be sewing their mouths shut.

The clever set design full of metaphors that underline the overarching rural hierarchies add to the dazzling performances, transformative soundtrack and brilliant writing to give a truly enjoyable piece of theatre that is Hello Farmaaish.

Agaaz Theatre Trust's *Rihla* is a speculative play by Neel Chaudhuri adapted from Andrea Flourakis' Greek drama *I Want A Country*. *Rihla* speaks of an idyllic town, a country imagined by a group of friends where chocolate is in plenty but the old are invisibilized. Where religion exists within limits and happiness exists without boundaries. It starts with these group of friends endeavouring out on sea and ends with them stranded at a new country. Almost Beckettian in nature, *Rihla*'s characters never truly find the ideal town they are looking for, but while they discuss the possibilities this town has to offer, they uncover the dirty politics that bring down their current state. The original play comes from a Greek playwright and it is no shock to the audience that it talks of a utopia - after all, wasn't it the Greek Plato who first described the perfect Republic? *Rihla*'s characters also jump out of their cognitive boundaries to imagine a town full of wonder, and the actors try hard to tackle a robotic sense that their dialogue delivery has adopted. A good discourse ensues on this ideal town and the audience is made to see through subtle expressions the slippery slope between utopia and dystopia, and for that *Rihla* deserves applause.

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The Unabashed Laughter

The Lavani Dancers of Sangeet Bari demand your laughter - they're not being pretentious about wanting it or shy about asking for it but they demand it straight up. It is a similar way in which they are unabashedly confident about their sexuality, realizing that these Lavani baithaks are usually organized for men but still holding complete charge of their bodies. Their bold moves and cajoling expressions add to the flirtatious rhythm of their dances and they look you straight into the eye, making you go red in the face. Through these inviting and seductive dance moves, the women of Sangeet Bari narrate their stories without letting the audience realize that a story has been told. The audience just knows, and can watch with reverence these dancers forever - until it is broken by the speakers on the side of the stage.

Although the presentation by the two speakers that is interspersed between the dances is informative, their lack of preparedness overpowers their will to spread knowledge about this traditional dance form. Even if we give them the benefit of the doubt and the performance a blanket of informality, it is hard not to be disturbed by the many cringe-worthy fumbles and the awkward page-ruffling. Moreover, the non-linear narrative of the performance urges one to classify it under "presentations" more than "plays", and becomes a performance with a non-linear narrative gone wrong. What the play Sangeet Bari does get right is the body positivity and the sexual agency that its dancers emanate through their performances, but the fourth wall is broken involuntarily a little too many times and an intense desire to entertain before educating gets in the way of a wholesome experience. *Sangeet Bari* is directed by Savitri Medhatul and written by Bhushan Korgaonkar.

The Empty Laughter

What does the laughter of a hungry man mean? A laughter that is only heard, perhaps, because of the deep emptiness of the stomach that it is echoed from? This empty laughter is what Gurleen Judge's *The Hunger Artist* emanates as it retells Kafka's short story with added layers of hunger as protest and the famine that has hit Indian farmers. Judge's *The Hunger Artist* begins with a recording of the audience which is projected on the screen - confused and embarrassed faces either hid themselves, peeked into the camera or pretended not to notice. But the spectators are a huge part of this text, without whom the concept of the Hunger Artist would stand

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redundant. It is a reflective question that the play asks indeed - what makes people interested in watching a man die of hunger? This question can be picked up and placed at the centre of the discourse on hunger as protest - Mahatma Gandhi did it, and so did Irom Sharmila. The gaze of the privileged audience is turned inwards when the camera is turned towards them, and they are made to realize how their primetime debate topics that are discussed and then forgotten are actual survival difficulties faced by the lesser privileged. The solo act by Mandar Gokhale lacks certain vigour and his movements feel incomplete, but the message is successfully transmitted to the audience, and the play does not even try to be anything else but a messenger. The minimalist set design representing a cage is accompanied by the best, almost impeccable light design of the festival and together these effects create a daunting realization for the audience. What stands out is the perfect way this text juxtaposes the Kafkaesque condition of starvation in our country with the poetry of Namdeo Dhasal and the narratives of the starving farmers of India. The play is honest because it is aware of not appropriating the story of the less privileged, but is focussed on turning the audience's gaze inward.

The Deranged Laughter

Providing the festival a cursive end, the final play - Bhasha Centre's *Eidgah Ke Jinnat* written and directed by Abhishek Majumdar was the perfect crescendo to display the political madness around us. Intensively research-laden and drowning with doses of intensity, *Eidgah ke Jinnat* does a great job at showcasing both sides of the coin with equal understanding. The Hindu soldier who is scared of gunshots and believes he needs to protect his religion and the innocent children of Kashmir who are dragged into communalist violence, both receive equal attention in this story. A deep reflection of the reverberating after-effects of trauma, the story follows a pair of siblings who lose their father to the violence in Kashmir. *Eidgah ke Jinnat* unfolds multiple narratives like the layers of an onion and is honest to each of its characters, and the rock music that supports these narratives adds more intensity to the bright blue lights and the intricate costumes. We see all our characters spiralling down a ladder, where the only laughter available to them is the laughter borne out of derangement.

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The structure of laughter imbibes in it some highs and lows, ups and downs – just the way some plays from the curation had the audience mirthful and shrieking while others created pin-drop silence. While some echoes of laughter were brimming with innocence and childish humour, other roars of hilarity sprung out of irony. A silence weaved between the laughs, though, was the common thread of all these types of laughter – a silence of questioning, interrogation and reflection.