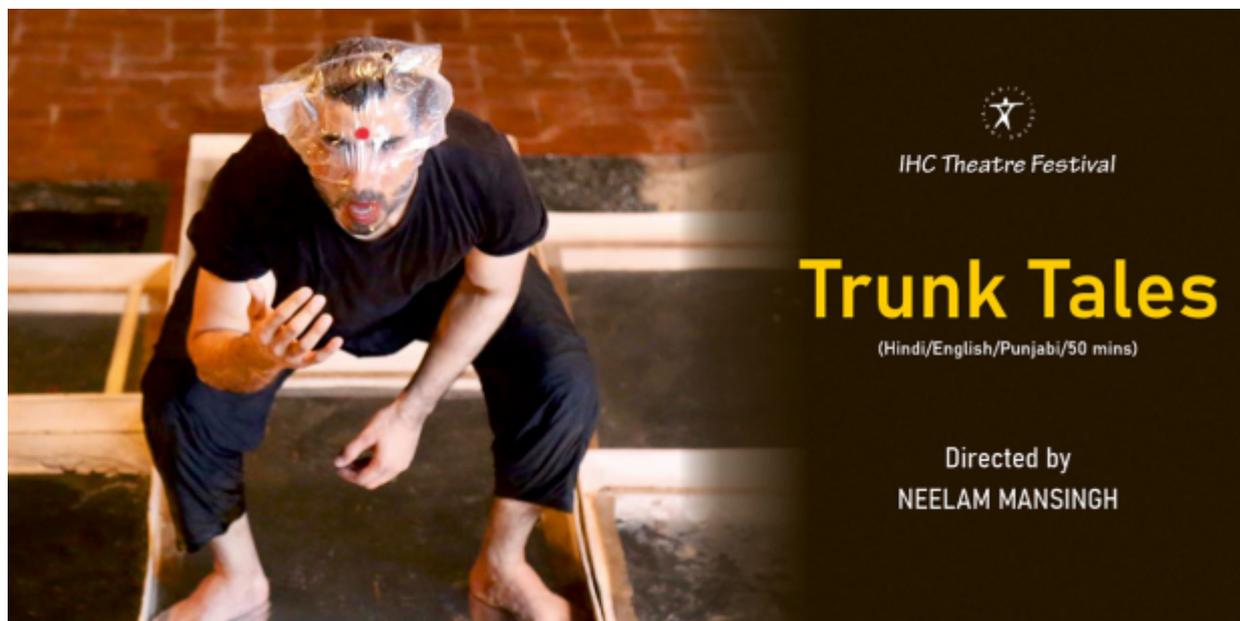


'TRUNK TALES' lives up to Neelam Mansingh's unique presentation style



Neelam Mansingh Choudhry is a well-known name in Hindi theatre world. A student of Ebrahim Alkazi at the National School of Drama, she has been running her group, The Company in Chandigarh since 1983. Her work always shows the high standards of production in her presentations, displaying the values inculcated by Alkazi in his students. Her plays like Kitchen Katha, Yerma, Naked Voices, Nagmandal etc. have received loud applause from the public, as well as received rave reviews from the critics. Her work has also earned her well-deserved international recognition.

Recently she brought her Hindi/English/Punjabi play 'Trunk Tales' to the IHC Theatre Festival in Delhi. It was a solo performance, although bearing the same old well-known mark of hers on the production. Her plays are generally based on her everyday observations and experiences of day-to-day life. She is master of creating magical moments out of the daily mundane chores of household. Remember the childhood games... 'Akkad bakkad bambe bo assi nabbe poore sau...', or 'Machhli jal ki

rani hai...'? That innocence of the childhood was present on the stage in this play... the innocence, which remains with us through our life-time, but which also becomes the 'other' thing of our life as we grow old!

A non-scripted performance piece, the play 'Trunk Tales' revolved around telling stories in a Dadi-Nani style, bringing out stories out of their 'potlis'... only that, here, the 'potlis' have been replaced in this play by four trunks kept on the stage. Stories tumble out of these trunks one by one, bringing us face to face with that 'otherness' in life. The point she wanted to stress upon was that we generally live within certain boundaries, as per the set rules of behaviour. Anything not conforming to these sets of rules creates a sense that the person going beyond these boundaries of rules is not one of us... he is the 'other' person in the society. She takes support of poems, childhood stories and little play-songs, small episodes, some memories for presenting her 'non-linear' stories, to tell about the people who don't really fit in," she said to someone in an interview.

These stories strived to present the 'otherness' in life... stories on politics of water, body-abuse including rape and child abuse representing no control on one's own body, hunger, and finally trans-gender behaviour... It is difficult to present the 'otherness' in gender in a palatable way, but Vansh Bhardwaj deserves applause for performing this difficult task so well... he knows how to use his body on the stage. "I had to develop different body languages and understand the psychology of the characters." Vansh said in an interview some time ago! I have seen Swatilekha Sengupta performing a full two and a half hours long solo 'Shanu Roychoudhury' on this very stage many many years ago. I hope to watch Vansh repeat that wonder some time, under the direction of Neelam Mansingh Choudhry sometime in future.



A Scene from Trunk Tales

In 'Trunk Tales', she had kept a few trays filled with water on the floor of the stage. With water, she wanted to present an essential element of life, which has a flexible nature, a fluidity, and gets easily moulded to take any shape. Water worked as the element of life represented in the stories told by the actor on the stage, who presented stories full of vigour and vibrancy of every daily life! Keeping the sets to a minimal is her known style as well as the need of the hour in today's constrained situations as far as presenting a play in an auditorium is concerned. Keeping the sets to a minimal also helps her create the ambience through the props and the activities of her actors on the stage.

She has done a play 'Kitchen Katha' on the theme of fire (although she concedes that the theme of fire was not on her mind when she did 'Kitchen Katha', neither was water on her mind while doing this play). Now she has done a play with water as its theme. We hope she comes out with the remaining three elements of life, earth, air and pran!

The thing that we missed the most in this play was live music by the folk singers of Punjab, her famous hallmark. She has done a lot in the past to revive Punjab's folk music, which had suffered a severe blow in the troubled times of Khalistani terrorism in Punjab in the eighties of the twentieth century. She tells that it is Corona to be blamed for missing on music... our theatre-persons have not been able to come out of the after-effects of Corona still. She avers, "we are still coming out of the effects of Corona, and it will take some time before we can come back to our own basics".

Best thing about her plays is that she does not try to make them a make-believe world... she actually brings the reality to the auditorium. Some of you might have enjoyed hot jalebis prepared by the 'halwai' in the auditorium itself while watching her play 'Kitchen Katha'! Alas, the jalebis did not reach me, as I was sitting in the sixth-seventh row on that day! She had taken inspiration from her childhood impressions of the tradition of 'langar' in Punjab for 'Kitchen Katha', where community cooking used to take place. In 'Trunk Tales' also, Vansh has a thali full of real food, and enjoying it actually on the stage, instead of empty thalis, cups and glasses, through which the directors ask the actors to pretend eating or drinking ... this adherence to 'reality' makes Neelam's plays a REAL treat for the eyes!

She plans to do Girish Karnad's Hayavadana in Hindi coming February. It is being planned to be done on a big scale. She avers that the actors from across the country will be a part of this production. She is using Karanth's translation for this production, although with some new insights into the play, keeping in mind the sensibilities of the modern times.



Neelam Man Singh

On the issue of the trends in play-writing these days, she does feel that more new plays are needed with newer sensibilities in mind. She feels that there should be deeper connection between the writer and director while developing new plays. Making one's own script by the director, in collaboration with the actor/s, is a new trend according to her, although it is not new... it has always been resorted to by the directors and writers. She quoted the making of Mohan Rakesh's plays by Alkazi, and also pasting of the new plays on the walls of Paris by Moliere, to solicit the response from the public directly during the writing of the play!

Folk Theatre of India: Koothu

The term Koothu refers to two performing arts viz. Terukuttu and Kattaikkuttu. In contemporary times, the two terms have an

interchangeable usage. However, in medieval times, the two terms referred to two entirely different dramatic art forms. Kattaikkuttu consists of performances that take place overnight at a stationary fixed place. Terukuttu often refers to mobile and non-stationary performances that usually take place in a procession.

Beyond transience – Soulful sufi rendition

An ethereal experience–

Sufi singers are prolific artists illuminating the possibility of uniting divine feelings with sublime love.

Vocalist Dhruv Sangari recreated the magical splendors of SUFIYANA culture with his vivacious serenity encompassing aesthetic beauty and reverential Indian ethics – magically interwoven.

For me, the program primarily effaced the Hindu Muslim divide as the singer so poetically inculcated the true feelings of divine invocation irrespective of class, caste distinction; a classic paradigm of the SUFIYANS who sing in praise of the lord. This ethereal composition he rendered " chaap tilak" was not only one of the sweetest sufi chants of the eve but also indoctrinated me and my folks (parents) with the message of "ISHWAR ALLAH TERO NAAM"- Am sure it might have made the recipients rethink the concept of caste and class differences often acting as a hindrance in matters of spiritual escalation.

Sangari's uniqueness lay in his profound explorations of the

renditions he chose. Each musical composition preceded a explanation admirably detailed to entrench the specialty of the song chosen. This reflected the erudition of the artist; a mandate with regards to a performance that's meant to be an IBADAT – A PRAYER to the almighty.

The open air theater of Darpana – NATRANI became the most adequate purveyor of the tools that assist such a presentation resounding the features of FOLK CULTURE. It was heartwarming to see people once again having gathered in an open space (independent of covid fears fortunately) to listen and get one glimpse of the talented artist. It replicated the village folk artistic tradition very well; of course the audiences were English speaking urban elite with modern western attires – a stark reality of the urban India today) I must admit that the organizers were pretty particular in their choices of apparels – Mallika Sarabhaiji in her traditional Indian dress and her accompanied trio too dressed similarly well; obviously one does expect the consciousness from someone as distinguished as them.

I got the privilege the second time to be at Natrani. The first time I went was some 10

Years back when I saw Rajit Kapoor performing Girish Karnad's monologue Flowers at the open air auditorium. It was an indelible experience and this one I had yesterday night revitalized my spirits and invigorated my soul to acknowledge the superiority of sufiyana art that's no less than a means to elevate our material consciousness towards the possibility of experiencing BRAHMANANDA – spiritual delight which crosses the boundaries of transient earthly living and becomes an eternally pleasurable ethereal experience. A heavenly feeling that Natyashastra speaks about so rightfully when it endorses natya as a blissful process meant for redeeming the world from sins. As Sangri rendered CHAP TILAK sab cheen li re mose naira milake – the feelings of respectful admiration arose in my heart for an artist who chose a sublime melody of SUFIYANA

sangeet which gives us a moment of realization " We love our lord too" not just worship him. Meerabai reverentially merged the feelings of adoration and invocation in her worship of Krishna. In the rendition I felt the same mood restored in me – self surrender to the lord I love and revere at the same time. Yes, it could be for someone close to us in fact anyone who we feel is inseparably in us – why only God? It was this intersection of divinity and earthly feeling of love that made the presentation so special, so heavenly.

I drank the elixir of sufiyana art sumptuously and though pressed for time wherein I couldn't listen to more than two melodious songs, I acknowledge my heart grew fonder.

Overall, I loved the performance and the night was indeed memorable with fine white lamps shining in the midst of the open air auditorium giving it the feel of a traditional Indian setting with oil lamps and lanterns adorning the environment making it look no less than a paradise. Natrani is a must visit and I would recommend it to one and all.that desire to relish classic art.

Last but not the least, its discipline is praiseworthy and noteworthy. We reached a bit late, gates were shut. Nonetheless, I must recognize their waiving of the stringent rule for us and letting us enter which was indeed an insignia of an organization that is both adequately strict and endearingly loving.

Thank you Natrani for an unforgettable event that is sure to remain perpetually etched in my memory as an experience beyond the fleeting worldly domains of earthly concerns.

Review by –

Dr. Payal Trivedi

[For comments if any post below the article on the website.]



THE LOCKDOWN LOVER that LOCKS YOU DOWN!



Lockdown Lover

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Well, any theatre performance is meant to entertain is an understatement today because we have all come to terms with the fact that theatre is much more than simply a mode of refreshment. Investing our time and energy in beholding any performance ought to enable us enough food for thought not just by being didactic but by helping us realize our weaknesses, our flaws and misdemeanours that may have led us to falsely believe in the material notion of scepticism that seems to have crept in all our walks of life today. We tend to always engage in self doubt, of essentially questioning the obvious and of incessantly negating all possibilities of giving stability to our lives. All that today's worldly compartments of propriety and impropriety have given us is a

bizarre set of meaningless precepts. These we follow mechanically with the fear of being ostracized by the so called normal society or flout entirely as a means of blatant rebuttal against the stringent myopic framework that often surrounds rules made for whom we label the 'Normal Man'. The category of the 'normals' includes those that bear the onus of proclaiming 'acting' according to the stipulated socio-cultural norms as a mark of sanity. This excludes any kind of aberration which may disturb the so called normal setting of a 'settled home and family' we humans often propagate as an insignia of 'orderly mental health'. Unfortunately for us, anything anyone does different from having a perfectly settled home is conventionally considered unhealthy and the primary cause of mental illness.

Well, the message is simple and clear but is conveyed through an essentially 'vague' motivation towards choosing 'absurd' mode of theatrical performance that leads the motto of laying bare this extremely vital issue hay ways. First and foremost, the disorderly array of character shifting that we come across mars the charm of this rendition at its very onset. That stage cannot capture the nuances of facial expressions is a matter of common understanding and therefore, it is obvious that when the actor shifts from one character to another, the performance does not seem to deal efficiently with this change simply because it is not required prominently to showcase the difference. When there is an overbearing energy that tries to dominate or suppress the other and the explicit resistance of the other is being displayed with repressed tendencies, it obviously should impart a lesson of a 'toxic relationship and its repercussions' when in this performance it comes out as an 'enforced torture' upon the audience to make them forcefully assent to the 'failure of values'. This failure is so anointed with the cumbersome obsession of anomaly that can be seen in the character using the 'whip' that acts as a paradigm of inexplicable violence that puzzles due to the lack of clarity. A more structured absurdism (If I am permitted to use this

expression) would have made it intelligible rather than prolix one, the performance chooses to adopt the 'heightened potency of absurdism' that is needless and I feel is so overwhelming that it almost nullifies the importance of conveying at least, 'some' meaning.

I do feel that proportionate dose of the vaccine called 'absurdism' can boost our immunity but an overdose may completely lead to multiple organ failures and not being sarcastic at all as a viewer I definitely felt that is performance is beyond my level of comprehension. It is possible that this is 'heightened intellectual apex that perhaps an ordinary theatre person as I may not be able to reach; definitely possible and I accept this with all humility!

A talented and popular theatre artist as Tathagata Chowdhury fails to cast a long lasting impression with his extraneous attempts to correlate absurd theatre with Indian bourgeois set up. This is simply because; the hypocrisy of today's English speaking Indian families with ultra modern outlook ultimately boils down to having a settled home with children. This is not dual mindset I suppose but is an outcome of the age old Indian mentality of being culturally rooted to one's customary adherence to tradition that seldom permits anomalous living. When Chowdhury tries to target the contemporary Indian society with its loopholes that disallow normalcy to them, he does not take into account the fact that the apparent aberration of tradition in India is equally a facade like its retention of its values is. That's the reason that he cannot think beyond a 'shattered morality' tendency of the Indian modern class and is unsuccessful in his attempt to impress with his absolutely vague acting. In my opinion, it is a failed attempt of displaying absurdity 'par excellence' that gets ruined due to the pressure of creating an intellectual feast that often becomes tasteless when the ingredients are overused. We get a feel of being LOCKEDDOWN by absurdity of this lockdown lover

who seems to have lost completely his senses in the motif of explaining the senselessness that prevails in our lives today; a fact that certainly cannot be denied but such bizarre engagement with the theme? I leave it to the viewers anyways.

Finally, I do acknowledge that drama is a means of self analysis that forbids insinuating anyone under any circumstance. This review is simply meant to give an unbiased outlook towards a performance and does not intend to dictate any opinion. Rest assured, it's simply my personal perception folks!

Is Theater a Sacred Ritual or Entertainment?

If theater is only a source of entertainment then it is expensive and inconvenient. Categorizing theater as a mode of entertainment is suicidal for theater. We need to explore the mystical-spiritual aspect of theater to keep it relevant.

Breaking barriers: How Purulia Chhau artistes came together to reimagine Tagore

for our times

Encouraged by the response to performances of Tasher Desh in Kolkata and Santiniketan last month, the team is making efforts to organize shows in other parts of West Bengal, Delhi and Mumbai

Manohar Khushalani's Team Building Exercises

By now you must be very excited to see the actual workshop conducted by Prof. Manohar Khushalani. Please watch the film of the actual workshop and listen to participants feedback also

Folk Theatre of India: Jatra

Sri Chaitanya, a prominent saint during the Bhakti moment is credited to be the inventor and the promoters of this music enriched form of theatre. It is widely believed that the first spectacle of the play was also done by Sri Chaitanya wherein he played the role of the Rukmini in the play, Rukmini Haran (the play was based on a story in the life of Lord Krishna).

Folk Dances of India: Jhora

Jhora folk dance is native to the states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand where it is celebrated with all pomp and show during the springtime celebrations by the locals. Jhora folk dance finds its root in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand, historically known as Uttaranchal.

Looking at Alternate Spaces for Performance in Delhi – NCR





Studio Safdar, 2253E, Shadi Khampur, Delhi 110008

Putting up any production can be most daunting for most theatre practitioners in India. It is customary for most Indian directors who many times, run small amateur theatre groups to not only foot all bills but also look after the needs of the artists involved. The most challenging of this cost is that of the auditoriums. Most proscenium auditoriums in Delhi and Gurgaon can cost anywhere between 15,000 (around \$220) to 1,00,000 (around \$950) depending on its size and capacity. Furthermore, there is a long waiting list to get the required dates, most weekends getting booked almost a year ahead! Hence, the supply versus the demand is either beyond one's means or it requires tremendous patience for the group to perform.

The need for finding alternate spaces for performances hence is rapidly growing which is being met to some extent by a few in India. There are several around Mumbai but here the article

will focus on two spaces created. The first one in that of the group, Rang Parivartan, in the growing rich cosmopolitan Gurgaon created by Mahesh Vasistha and the second one , the Teesri Manjil, of Ruchika Theatre group, created by Feisal Alkazi in South Delhi. It is important to focus on these two spaces, as the city of Delhi besides being the capital of India, is the Mecca of theatre training, while Mumbai largely focuses on film production and the thriving industry of Bollywood.

Delhi, has been timelessly known for its intense theatre training that is both affordable and also provides the correct knowledge to the aspiring actors. The prestigious National School of Drama is situated here, along with Sri Ram Centre, the school of Arts and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University that offers not only the masters course in performance studies but also a Ph.D in theatre and also the newly formed Ambedkar University that offers bachelors and masters in Performance studies are also located here. Besides this we also have an a diploma course offered in theatre by Indira Gandhi Open University, that is lesser than \$25 for six months, as an distance program.





Feisal Alkazi and his private rehearsal space – Teesri Manzil, South Delhi

As training in theatre is of high value in Delhi, there is a need for students to experience the stage as much as possible. It becomes impossible for students to do theatre without the experience of a stage, lights or sets. Both Mahesh Vashista and Feisal Alkazi have found the answers and that too within their own homes! Both these thespians have created beautiful auditoriums within the upper floors of their homes. Both these spaces are intimate and are not open for the public, which in other words means is not for commercial gains but rather for training and also for holding small intimate shows for a discerning audience.

Feisal is of the opinion that one must allow theatre to enter homes and allow the audience to become a part of his large family. He says, ' Most actors have been with me for as much as 25 years and above and they have been an integral part of my life, hence I see new audiences as the same. I am just extending the Teesri Manjil, or my third floor to my family who should not be taken as some disconnected people.' Radhika Alkazi echoes much the same as she receives each one of her guests with warmth and enthusiasm and both she and her son Arman take immense joy in serving each guests fresh home made kebab rolls, biryani and wine.



Mahesh Vashist's Private performance Space, Gurgaon



Mahesh Vashista

Mahesh Vashista whose students have painstakingly made the auditorium with him extends his performance space free of charge to theatre practitioners not only across Delhi and Gurgaon but anyone who wishes to perform there. Both these auditoriums might seem like one as small steps but careful attention has been given both by Feisal and Mahesh regarding the technicals of an auditorium. Feisal has painstakingly thought of the lighting (having over 20 set lights including pars and LEDS and a dimmer) and the correct sound proofing of the stage. Mahesh has not only kept the lights and stage

setting in mind but has also kept the make up rooms in mind of the actors, and also has carefully insulated the place.



Akshara Theatre – Baba Khadak Singh Marg, Delhi



Kaala Dibba

Actor Factor Studio

3rd Floor, 416/2 Ghitorni Market

It is heartening to see such magic being created and to be lucky even to have open access to these performance spaces. Such free flowing needs based training venues are going to bring more thespians to do the same with their homes. This will make as Feisal wishes and does, a family of theatre and

not mere disconnected spectators who come and do not feel the intimacy of theatre due to the daunting presence of the mighty auditoriums.



Black Box Theatre, A 68, Okhla Industrial Estate, Phase 2, Delhi

The informal performance spaces have come up because theater is becoming un-affordable because of lack of revenue and astronomical cost of auditorium spaces in Delhi. Leaving you images of some of these spaces which offer hope for survival of Amateur theatre in Delhi. More about it in the next piece by Gouri Nilakantan