

AGARBATTI – THE SEXUAL INCINERATION ON STAGE – SO ARRESTING!

Sexually Explicit Content – Well, the phrase itself provokes many intelligent communities to either hide their face behind the four walls of the house or to protest against it in loud volumes. I must say, the opening scene of the play AGARBATTI - (**Directed By:** Swati Dubey **Produced By:** Samagam Rangmandal Written by Ashish Pathak, the play has bagged four awards at Mahindra Excellence in Theater Awards META) is been so intelligently devised by the director that it resists both these reactions in the most convincing manner. The scene is brutal in its explicit provocation of sexual act openly but, in spite of the same, it forces admiration for the craftsmanship that works behind making such a sensuous implication bold and yet appreciable in its own right.

Women who are the major participants of this scene inviting and enacting sexual insinuations manage to extract the susceptibility that stimulates sexual urge and receptivity towards sexual matters in the feminine gender. The most significant part of the reality about women especially those in the conservative Indian rural areas (now I am not generalizing here though) who despite being apparently uninitiated in the matters of sex, as the world knows it, display their repressed sexual urge through such innuendos. Primarily, this sort of depiction on the proscenium in front of an apparently cultured urban audience accompanies the predicament of these women being stereotyped as flagrant on account of the evident unconcern about propriety. The consideration that the lack of urban literacy in these ladies may provoke them to comply with blatant projections of the kind they choose to engage into in such private gatherings exclusively for women may or may not be the conscious level of

acceptance in the midst of the educated audience. The same being represented in a rural set up amidst village audience also may not offer a neat solution for the participants. This is because, the onslaught of orthodoxy may not give it a fair chance to explain the social reality that forces the play participants to opt for such depictions that escape revering societal taboos against phenomenon like sex.

Witnessing the scene, it seems the director makes a bold choice; the one that lets him the freedom to outdo inhibitions that often mar the essence of the play despite an interesting script. That sexual acts do often have the potential to be synonymous with brutality is the implication one explicitly gathers when one watches the sexual act being symbolically represented through the means of an enactment and gives a feel of the supposed theme (Now I need to watch the play to comment more on this) this play perhaps would be dealing with coercion the women often encounter with respect to overbearing masculine tendencies. It is this very intent that makes the apparent sexual content in the scene worth watching (particularly for those that know its content) as it emblematically proclaims the reason to justify its inception on the stage. It works as a foreboding of a gruesome massacre that is perhaps supposed to occur next. However, for someone (as I) who has no knowledge of the subject matter on which the play is based nor has access to the entire script of the play, this entire scene comes as a jolt for the manner and the extent to which a sexual intercourse is celebrated elevates curiosity to construe the reason that it has been done this way. Therefore, the scene appears relevant to those that know the reason and interests those that do not know the reason for the explicit proclamation of sex in the opening scene of this drama. This (I feel) makes it a justifiable attempt in spite of its radical nature and helps it survive the jeopardy of questions or objections that accompany a presentation of such an explicit kind. When you explicitly dramatize "let's have sex" for the people, you are required to maintain a symbolic

decorum which does not exclude the need to be barefaced. This paradox is a difficult challenge and to a great extent it has been managed very well by making women participants cover their visage (full/half) with veils that douse their brazen nature in spite of its openness- and it's supposed to be so in conventional milieu(supposedly). Moreover, the mannerisms of theirs in terms of aping a sexual intercourse are well regulated in spite of the recklessness because every time you see the actor in disguise of a man attempting to assault, there is an obvious emphasis on the mode of representing it as a part of a dramatization than a realistic event. There is a dramatized attempt, extremely effective by the women to thwart him from the shameless act.

When you witness the entire dramatization, since it appears 'dramatic', it convinces that it is not ruthless in spite of obviously trying to show the ruthlessness that accompanies such acts which embody forceful subjugation of women. A well balanced attempt which certainly shows how tactfully a vigilant and responsible theatre practitioner can manage the repercussions that are invariably a part of such a portrayal which intends to upset many brand ambassadors of decency and propriety. Well, admitting the fact that sobriety is an essential responsibility to be observed in artistic endeavours, I also feel that the needful depiction of violence and sex may not be essentially curbed but rather could be exposed taking full advantage of the scope that theatre offers; to dramatize the dramatic content. I felt, this scene is a vital to construe the relevance of histrionics that must be in close proximity with reality but not lose connect with the genre of "performance". It is this distanced involvement of this scene with 'realism' that erases all issues pertaining to decorum instead of avoiding it entirely as a tabooed matter or criticizing its candour, watching it makes one rethink about the societal indifference towards certain realities that has ushered the need for art to penetrate into such explicit rebuttal of the so-called morality. As a result one cannot

help but admire its intensity apart from anything else...therefore; the dramatized sexual havoc on stage appears so arresting!

For comments (if any) please post in the box below.

For more information on the play please visit:

Sources:

Agarbatti: The Play – <http://metawards.com/plays/agarbatti>

‘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.

THE LOCKDOWN LOVER that LOCKS YOU DOWN!



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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 this 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!

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).

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 is 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 Vashistha 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 Vashistha

Mahesh Vashistha 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

Playwriting for Children

10 golden pointers to be kept in mind while writing children's plays.

1) Do not be afraid of using contemporary language and one can even throw in few phrases in Hindi, if the need be. Make it Hinglish if you want.

2) Children love comedy. They might not have the same taste as adults and might find things like " farting" " throwing up" comic. Add them to the script, they just add to the flavour. Please do not become prudish.

3) Another thing that fascinates children is the idea of mystery and surprise, you can use them too.

Read the rest.....

Folk Theatre of India: Bhand Pather

The word 'Bhand' means the traditional and the age-old folklore entertainers from India, Nepal, Pakistan. The form had thrived and grown manifolds during the peaceful times in the valley. However, with the rise of anti-societal elements, the art form has given the theatre form a huge setback. Society must progress towards peace and let the lost theatre form regain its formal glory.

Natsamrat NatyaUtsav Schedule March 2022

During the six-days there will be participation from ten different directors on one platform. The directors are: Chandershekhar Sharma, Vishaw Deepak Trikha from Rohtak, Rajesh Tiwari, Ashraf Ali, Varun Sharma, Sunil Chauhan and Shyam Kumar and the plays are 'Lajwanti' , 'Gadhe Ki Barat' , 'Kambakht Ishq', 'Jaanch Padtal' , 'Charandas Chor' , 'Aadhe Adhure' 'Digdarshak' , 'Shikasta Booton Ke Darmiyan' 'Chuhel' & 'Ek Ruka Hua Faisla'.