

35th Urdu Drama Festival: “Jeb Qatra” – A Living Portrayal of Manto’s Human Sensitivity



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The 35th Urdu Drama Festival at Shri Ram Centre, Mandi House, came alive with emotion and introspection as Adakar Theatre Society presented “**Jeb Qatra**”, a sensitive stage adaptation of Saadat Hasan Manto’s celebrated short story. The play was directed by **Himmat Singh Negi**, with **Prince Rajput** as the assistant director.

□ **A Mirror to the Human Conscience**

Few writers have captured human vulnerability like Manto. His world is one where morality blurs, and truth emerges in the unlikeliest of hearts. **“Jeb Qatra”** (The Pickpocket) unfolds the story of a thief who, after stealing a woman’s purse, is struck by remorse upon realizing her pain. What begins as a simple act of theft becomes a journey of awakening – revealing that compassion and humanity never truly die within us.

“Manto’s world is not black and white – it’s painfully, beautifully human.”

□ **Direction: Simplicity with Depth**

Director Himmat Singh Negi handled the play with remarkable restraint and clarity. Using minimal stage material and precise visual language, he transformed Manto’s prose into a living, breathing experience. Through dialogue, gesture, and silence, Negi underlined a universal truth – “Humanity is the real religion; Hindu and Muslim are but names.”

The lighting and music intertwined beautifully to highlight emotional shifts, while the staging remained both symbolic and grounded – a hallmark of thoughtful direction that never overshadows the writer’s soul.

□ **Performances that Breathe Life into Words**

Javed Sameer (as Kashi) and **Nidhi Mahawan** (as Bimla) led the cast with extraordinary poise and authenticity. Their chemistry, command over Urdu diction, and emotional restraint brought Manto’s text vividly to life.

Director Himmat Singh Negi, appearing briefly as the character Pandit, made a lasting impact through his controlled yet powerful presence.

The ensemble – **Asif Khan, Mukesh Gupta, Nikunj Raj, Deepika Bisht, Mayank Tiwari, Sachin, Ishika Khankwal, Deepika Sharma, Angel Suryavanshi, Prateek, Ashish Singh, Mohammad Umar,**

Suraj, and Rahul – delivered strong performances that maintained rhythm and realism throughout.

“Each performer seemed to live inside Manto’s sentences, not merely act them.”

□ **Behind the Curtains: The Invisible Strength**

The backstage team lent quiet brilliance to the performance. The play’s lighting, designed by **Dev**, deepened the emotional tone, while **Sham Najim Khan’s** music lent poignancy and flow. **Nikunj, Ashish, and Dalchand** designed costumes that reflected cultural subtlety and simplicity. The make-up by **Umar and Angel** was balanced and character-driven, while **Rishabh, Mukesh, and Mayank** handled sets and properties with an understated elegance that allowed the focus to remain on the actors and emotions.

Together, they created a seamless aesthetic that reflected Manto’s realism – raw, restrained, and real.

□ **Final Takeaway**

“**Jeb Qatra**” was not merely a performance – it was a conversation between stage and soul. The fusion of Manto’s empathy, Negi’s direction, and the ensemble’s sincerity crafted an experience that lingered beyond the final curtain.

“Manto’s stories are not meant just to be read – they are meant to be felt, staged, and lived.”

As the audience rose in applause, it was clear that this rendition of “**Jeb Qatra**” had not only entertained but touched hearts – reminding us that even in darkness, humanity glows quietly within.

The film 'Manto'—A Review by Raj Ayyar



'I am a walking, talking Bombay.'

'Saadat Hasan Manto, RIP. He lies in that grave, wondering: Who is the greater storyteller? God or Manto?'

—Saadat Hasan Manto.

I enjoyed watching the biopic 'Manto', A great Indo-Pakistani genius comes alive in this film. A man whose life-world is torn apart by the brutal Partition, one whose life thereafter would always bear the scars of that trauma.

Manto's intense, and yet funny Urdu storytelling elan comes to life, as does his quirky humor, his roving gaze that took in details of street life with merciless precision (always privileging the marginalized street person, sex worker or insane victim of the India-Pakistan partition), and stitched them into narratives.

It is a measure of Nandita Das' skill as a director, that five Manto stories are woven into the fabric of the film, one each for his five most creative and tormented years—often, the film slips from a 'realistic' biographical description into the heart of a Manto story. Only later does the viewer come to realize that s/he is now out of the story, and back to Manto's life.

Hats off to Nawazuddin Siddiqui for pulling off such a complex role with elan—he captures the humor and dark irony of Manto's personal conversations, as also of his stories with a seemingly effortless ease.

Rasika Dugal has a sidekick role—as Manto's wife Safia, she is reduced to the role of a codependent, mothering wife, who takes care of him in his darkest moments.

I loved Rajshri Deshpande as Ismat Chughtai—she looks a bit like the young Ismat and portrays her love-hate for Manto well ('Manto my friend, Manto my enemy').

The film reminded me of a forgotten Bollywood matinee idol—Shyam Chadha. He was Manto's closest friend and might have broken the rule of the filmic triumvirate—Raj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar, and Dev Anand, had his life and career not ended tragically in an accident on the sets.

Tahir Bhasin is adequate to the role but lacks Shyam's extreme good looks, and his flashy personality.

The film relives two of Manto's best stories—'Thanda Gosht' (Cold Meat), and 'Toba Tek Singh'. The former about a man stabbed to death by a jealous sweetheart confessing that he had an extra-marital quickie with a corpse, and the latter the ultimate Indo-Pakistani story about the horrors of Partition, seen through the eyes of a madman.

One wishes that the film had spent more time re-creating 'Toba Tek Singh', and less on Manto's rehab and therapy. It does capture Manto's depressive alcoholism after his move from his beloved Bombay to Lahore, but those scenes could have been shortened without losing the overall effect.

—Raj Ayyar