The Belgian Embassy: A Masterpiece Revisited / Seema Bawa

This multi domed, arched, brick complex on Shanti Path is not only a landmark that defines the Delhi landscape but is perhaps also a watershed in Indian architecture. As such the Belgian Embassy has evoked heated debate amongst the practitioners of architecture over the period of two decades, since the time of its design in 1980.

Much of the controversy is focussed around the fact that Satish Gujral, its designer is not a professional architect. Going down memory lane, Gujral recalls that his interest in architecture was derived from his engrossment with the mural as a medium of public art. With this came the conviction that a mural, a painting or a sculpture to be successful in a building has to come form a single vision- “breathe from the single lung,” as he puts it. For this he had to design the building himself. In order to achieve this “I started to assist the architects of projects in which I was doing the murals, ” reminiscences Gujral. His early training in the Lahore art institution also came in handy where the curriculum had included draughtsmanship, carpentry, metalwork and the like.

With this came the conviction that instead of bringing art to the public place as through a mural, the need was to make the public place a work of art by itself. So after designing few residences, he submitted his design in a competition to build the Belgian Embassy in Chankyapuri in New Delhi.

The Embassy unlike most buildings is not oriented to the center of the plot. Instead the four major units are in all corners of the semi triangular shaped plot- the Ambassadors

Residence, the Chancery, the Counsel's' residence and the servant quarters. "By placing them in this way I created a tension between the buildings," explains Gujral. In the middle is a landscaped courtyard, what Dr.R S Sodhi, an eminent planner and expert on large complex designs, calls the *veda* , the *baramda*, or a cul de sac that epitomizes the north Indian village.

In fact, the complex has a rather late Mughal feel to it. Originally the jury that awarded the project had felt that this Indianness was a drawback and that the Embassy should reflect the character of Belgium. But the Premier intervened and said that for him this was a qualification. Commenting on the influence of globalization on architectural practice, Gujral says "modern architecture is built for nowhere and speaks of nowhere. But building is like a human being – it has its own identity and provides an identity to its inhabitants." According to Arjun Thapar, an architect who teaches at the School of Planning and Architecture "The Embassy is not a pure building rather is architecture that reflects an artist's thinking and personality."

"When I sat down to design it, it was like I paint, without conscious thought that I want it to be like this or that- emotion finds its style. I introduced a sculptural element that was natural with my background. Where I used conscious thought was in the planning," says Satish Gujral.

Sodhi concurs "the Belgian Embassy is a sculptural form, specially from the outside. Moving inside is like moving through sculptured space." Herein lies the problem. " Probably after having conceived of the form, Gujral didn't want to compromise with it and was therefore not able to plan the openings, windows and doors, " he clarifies adding " we architects feel that form of the building should emerge form the foundations and function rather then vice versa."

Gujral however feels that "professionals always abuse the non-

professionals, and talk about techniques. It is only in the modern times that the divorce between architecture, sculpture and painting has taken place."

"Visiting the Belgian Embassy is like visiting as museum. It is not like a regular office space." Unlike other embassy structures in the Diplomatic Enclave, this is not cold and intimidating. "It is like an oasis amongst many other ugly and hostile structures. Open, friendly and non-intimidating," says Thapar.

Placing it in context of history of design Thapar feels that it made architectural history, in the manner it broke norms of office buildings. Sodhi agrees and says that it was probably the first time that exposed bricks were used for a formal building, bricks were usually considered and informal medium. The use of exposed bricks however was not new, considered that Le Corbusier had built almost the entire Chandigarh with this look. Bricks are also problem material because they allow for leakage unless until the roofing has been properly treated, especially in context of the Embassy the wall merges into the roof shaped like a dome, explains Sodhi.

The designer remarks that "in the 15 years of its existence its importance has grown around the world." The best encomium for the Belgain Embassy is proabably provided by Gujral himself, "If Michaelanglo's Sistine Chapel could survive for so many centuries, why the Belgian Embassy would not."

The Owl and the Pussy Cat /

Seema Bawa



Actors: Kavita Dang and Kumud Mishra
Director: Satyajit Sharma
"***The Owl and the pussy cat went to sea in a beautiful pea green boat…***"

Thrown together in a low-rent bachelor's flat instead of a 'pea-green boat', the odd couple in this highly amusing **Bill Manhoff comedy**, is certainly not at sea! 'The Owl', Felix played by **Kumud Misra**, a highly accomplished actor, is a self-styled intellectual author – while 'the Pussycat' played by **Kanika Dang**, is a wannabe actress and model – however, to pay the bills she entertains gentleman callers, a prostitute but not promiscuous.

Having noticed the stream of gentlemen caller at her apartment through his binoculars, the peeping owl does his 'civic' duty by informing the superintendent of the building. The pussycat with nowhere to spend the night seeks revenge by imposing on the owl for a bed. And then, through a battle of wits, words, and wisdoms they both start to 'educate' each other as well as the audience in ways they never knew they could.

The current production by Dotted Line Productions has wisely kept it simple and has not endeavored to create convoluted and over intellectualized caricatures of the protagonists. The director, **Satyajit Sharma**, an NSD Alumni with several

outstanding acting and directorial performances to his credit, takes two great actors who handle some good old fashioned repartee rather well; coupled with adept handling of a witty script to put together an eminently watchable show.

The play focuses on two people who get to know each other, have sex, and eventually fall in love. As in most romantic comedies, one-liners abound and the protagonists are shown falling from their own self constructed identities. The fight in Felix's apartment after Doris barges in at the beginning is hilarious. She gets upset by his use of big words, but eventually buys her own guide to extending one's vocabulary. He is horrified by her "filthy" animal existence exemplified in his use of words like gutter slime and filth for her, but delights in the new experiences she has to offer. The two show each other new ways of looking at things and which is why Doris and Felix's chemistry works for the audience. It's is akin to what *happens* in real life. Their romance is played for laughs, but it's also sweet and touching. Felix, like most men, has to have a near nervous breakdown before deciding Doris is the one for him through a bitter-sweet dream sequence that evokes meta-theatre. As each displays their softer selves, the audience realizes they have more in common than they think. The two are in transition; looking for that obscure goal of success; he in writing, she in acting. This shared ground draws them together and reflects to the audience a very real struggle that we all experience in relationships.

Odd couples, whether of the same or different sexes have been a comedy formula for decades. The play enthralls with its at times salty language. Most importantly, Kumud and Kanika have a very definite chemistry. Though Kanika's is better delineated and in intrinsically is the more outrageous and attractive character (being the underdog) in the script, it does not steal the focus. Kumud interprets the inherent wimpy-ness and prissyness of the character with a paradoxical male strength and libido. This makes for a powerful performance

that converts the essentially mono-dimensionality of the character into a rather complex and conflicted one. The interlude when the wimpy Felix transforms briefly to a randy 'baby' is remarkably executed with Kumud performing from each pore of his being. Kanika has put in a lot of effort into building her character but while she is able to bring to fore the tartness of Doris, the vulnerability written into the character does not come out as well as it may have. Though this prostitute has a heart and it shows. While the play per se is not deep enough to allow for great acting, it does give scope to the two protagonists to demonstrate impressive technical finesse; the director who is apparently debuting for the group needs to be complemented for this.

In order to be memorable theater, the discovery by Felix and Doris that they are good for each other need not be revelatory in the vein of a metaphysical revelation, but should be funny. The director and his cast achieve this with ease. The humor in "The Owl and The Pussycat," depends largely on sarcasm, insult and the sort of logic that has Doris announce: "I may be a prostitute, but I'm not promiscuous." A lot of the humor of the play depends on language and the "play" thereon. Much is made of the fact that Doris doesn't understand words like despicable, aesthetic, assimilate and intrinsic while Felix who seeks to define himself through words or concepts finds them completely incapable of addressing his feelings for Doris. A comedy based largely on language and timing is always a difficult ask and the current production delivers in aces.

Directorial skill is amply demonstrated in terms of technique, stage craft and spatial usage. The fundamentals of good stagecraft such as blocking, body language and use of space have a refreshing rehearsed certainty and professionalism fast disappearing from current productions. Interludes of well chosen music pieces and the intermittent use of gaps during the play deserve to be commended. This despite the somewhat

inadequate lighting arrangement around the proscenium of the LTG auditorium

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Jodha Akbar – The Film / Seema Bawa

Seema Bawa analyses this highly controversial film with a historical perspective





Actors: Aishwarya Rai and Hrithik Roshan
The historian in me could not resist having a *dekko* at a historical romance based on a character such as Akbar, who indeed is a larger than life figure of world history. A man of vision, statesmanship and great depth Akbar was the *Insaan-e-Kamaal* of his era. Hrithik Roshan as the young Akbar indeed does not disappoint even though in terms of physique he does not match the descriptions of the historical Akbar. The scenes

depicting his valour, strength and prowess in battle, though competently performed are not exceptional. It is the sheer regalness of his bearing and the small details such as the fluid and effortless movements with which he sits on the throne, an act which requires immense theatrical perfection, that help him make the character his own. The scene showing Akbar getting into a trance while listening to mystical music of Sufi dervishes is authentic to the sources and enacted with great felicity. Aishwarya Rai as Jodhaa is right out of Mughal-Rajput miniatures paintings in her stance, apparel, ornaments and indeed her entire external persona.

The character of Akbar is better delineated because of the wealth of source material available, much of which is hagiographic in nature. That is not to say that the counterview was not available as is seen from the killing of Adham Khan Akbar's foster brother. Other aspects of Akbar's prowess such as his exceptional skill as a bare-hand fighter, his dueling an elephant, his consulting philosophers of other faiths; all having basis in historical sources ring quite true in the film.

Jodhaa, on the other hand, being largely a figment of the writer-director's imagination, has been conceptualized with less depth. The single character trait that has been reiterated is her spirit, and her spirited resistance to patriarchal values which while anachronistic to the period depicted, is also quite tedious. Her depiction as a Rajput woman of honour and integrity is overstressed.

As for the characterization of secondary characters, unlike Lagaan, in Jodhaa Akbar this aspect has been largely ignored. Instead we have stereotypes paraded as Rajput Ranas, and good and faithful courtiers such as the *Khan-i-khanan* and Todar Mal versus fanatical *ulema* and scheming relatives. The entire structure of Mughal aristocracy, the *mansabdars*, so significant for the actual and visual construction of the Mughal era, is overlooked.

The film succeeds in reconstructing the sense of architectural spaces of the grand Mughal era, especially the *Diwan-i-Aam*. The battles and the epic scale are well done even though the armies rush towards each other rather than in formation.

The music of AR Rahman goes well with the film but does not stand out. The background score though is excellent.

The film is at one level an elaborate seduction of the spirited though mono-dimensional Jodhaa by a rather desirable Akbar. The plot is entirely based on coitus-interuptus, which is interrupted ad-nauseum where the consummation is heartily to be wished for so that one can finally go home. The sexual tension is very well structured and indeed works very well but for the length it has been stretched out. The political intrigues and the romance appear to be yoked together by violence and are not linked organically. Indeed they should have been two separate films.

Perhaps the entire relationship of Jodhaa and Akbar should have been read within the context of sexual politics that underlay the harem of the Mughals, which could have served as an interesting back drop to the delineation of Emperor Akbar, arguably the greatest monarch and statesman this land has seen. We know that Akbar had at least two wives (besides many concubines) before he married the Rajput princess. The Rajput princess, whatever her real name may have been, would have been competing with them for her Emperor’s favours and allusions to the same may have made interesting viewing. Instead the harem intrigues center around her conflict with Maham Anaga Akbar’s foster mother whose importance had waned by the time Akbar attained adulthood.

The film is largely didactic in that it addresses issues of shared cultural heritage and communal harmony without appearing to preach. The historicity of Jodhaa/ Harka or Jia Bai is irrelevant to the film.

Religare Art Gallery: The Decorated Cow / Seema Bawa

Seema Bawa curates a Solo Show of Paintings and Sculptures by Sidharth



It was an event to which the whole city was making a bee line. Art lovers, critics, artists, curators – they were all there. And why not. An artist and a Curator were resurfacing after a long time.

Sidharth, the mystic artist returns to the public gaze after a gap of some years with his much anticipated show, The Decorated Cow, curated by StageBuzz's art columnist Seema Bawa and presented by Religare arts.i from March 13th to April 13th at the Religare arts.i gallery.

For this show Sidharth has executed paintings, drawings and sculptures based on the continuum of the traditional and contemporary relationship of human beings with, India's sacred animal, the cow. On one hand the works view the cow in mythological, historical and socio-religious contexts where the Bull and the Cow are revered, adored and granted an intimate space within the household. On the other side, the post modern man has removed the cow from this space and created a disjuncture not only with the cow but the ecology and the world of nature she represents.

Kamadhenu, Surabhi, Nandi-symbols of prosperity and joy; the pastoral pleasures of Krishna's cow; the cow in nature; the cow lost in the urban jungle, wandering on heaps of rubbish; the cow as the source of dairy and meat products, pumped full of chemical enhancers and pumped out of milk- all wander in the Sidharth's canvases and consciousness.

The show thus, is a powerful commentary on the consumerist society and its greedy, all devouring need for material comforts. In the process the human is encroaching on the space of fellow inhabitants on earth, leading not only to an ecological disaster but to a dislocation of the human from traditional, philosophical and ethical moorings. The show interrogates this dislocation that has left the cow desacralised, abandoned and exploited.

This process has been highlighted by the comments of writers, such as Aman Nath, Vandana Shiva, Anirudh Chari, Kishore Singh, K Bikram Singh among others, on the cow in Sidharth's art in the catalogue and the show. Thus, there are multiple voices dialoguing with the image created by one artist from varied vantage points, be these anthropological, ecological or cultural.

The colours in the paintings are fresh and luminescent. Sidharth has an intense and personal relationship with these colours, which is not surprising given that he makes his own

colours using mineral and plant sources. The sculptures in the show provide a vital focal point given their three dimensionality and versatility in terms of size and materials used, ranging from marble, cowries to transparent fiber glass. The contemporary and mystical concerns centered on the cow have been amplified in a short film and music composed by the artist that will accompany the exhibition.

Sidharth’s art while deeply rooted in philosophic tradition contends with modernity in terms of tradition speaking to contemporary concerns.The artist, as an ecologue and cultural conservationist, dialogues with the contemporary world using the cow as a metaphor; cow is the projection of human thought, cow is a symbol of human psyche, cow is earth- the nature out there which man seeks to bend to his will.

